

AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY

Acts 4:32-5:11

The world of music and poetry and writing reveals one of our deepest desires. The divided and isolated experiences in recent days affirmed it: we were made to do life in an authentic, loving, harmonious community. Real, deep relationships. There's only one problem: we seldom experience it fully. Why is that? That's sort of what we're going to look at today from Acts 4 & 5, looking at some requirements for authentic community. First, we're going to make a pitstop in Genesis to see why we're made for community and why God's so serious about it.

Whenever you go to put a puzzle together, what's the first thing you do after you dumping all of pieces out? You prop the cover photo up so you can see the big picture. When you see the big picture, it makes it easier to put the smaller pieces together. Same with life: if you get the big picture of what it's about and where it's going, you understand how to operate in the everyday moments. Genesis 1 reveals the big picture.

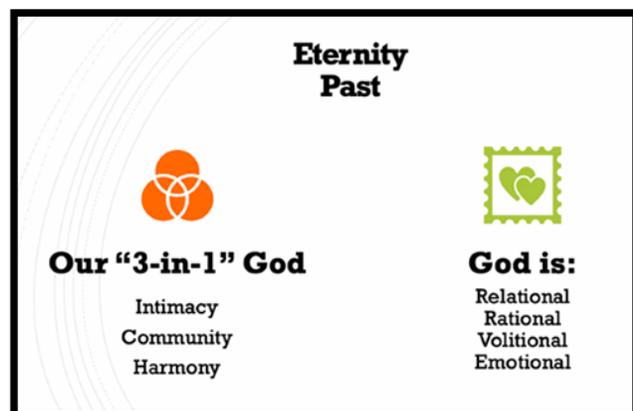
I. THE BASIS FOR AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY. (Eternity Past; Gen. 1:26-28)

"Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them."

The most interesting part of this text is the use of the words "Us" and "Our". Who's Us? "Let Us... Our image... Our likeness." Long story short, this is a divine deliberation between the Godhead when mankind is created. God is a 3 in 1 God we call the **Trinity**. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God – but the Father is not the Son, the Son's not the Spirit, etc. He's *not* just 1 God in 3 parts or 3 modes, but **1 God in 3 Persons**. It's a difficult to wrap your mind around and that's okay. It's evidence man didn't make this stuff up.

But what this tells us is that **God is by nature is a relational being** with both a **plurality** and **oneness** to Him. He has forever been, by His very nature, a loving, intimate, harmonious communal being before men or angels were ever created.

**Authentic, loving, harmonious
community has always existed within the
Triune nature of God.**



Jesus tells us that the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14), the Son glorifies the Father (17:14), and the Father the Son (17:5). It's something that has been going on for all of eternity, before the world began (17:5). When you ponder that, you see that Trinity is not something stationary but always in orbit. No member of the Trinity ever sits in the middle, insisting that the other members orbit around them. They're always in motion with mutually self-giving love. Theologians like C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* call this **the dance of God**.

We, however, tend to be self-centered, wanting the world or others to revolve around us. But when you delight in someone, like the members of the Trinity do with each other, is you start to orbit around them and seek their interests.¹ It's like a dance when they delight in you too.

The Trinity explains reality. *If there's no God*, our emotions and desires for relationships are merely biochemical states in the brain that come from blind personal forces. *If there is a God, and He is not Triune*, that means there was a time when there was no love until he created other beings. But *if God is Triune*, then loving relationships make sense because we are made in His image. When we say God is love it means He is by His very essence and nature, love. Ultimate reality goes back to a community of Persons who know and love one another forever.

And I remind you of this because once you get the big picture and capture the vision, you start to understand yourself and what the problem is. It's easier to stay on track with what really matters in life and not get distracted by things that don't. Even more than commands, we need to see a vision that gives the reason for the commands. "*Lay aside falsehood.*" Why? Because it's sin and it ruins the harmony in your relationships with God and man. It ruins what you were made for. If a church bickers and splits over every little thing, it has lost its vision.

Authentic community requires a vision of our ultimate purpose.

Before the fall into sin, the picture we get of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman is incredible. Adam was made from dust but Eve from Adam and they're joined together in plurality and oneness. There was no shame. No guilt. No pretending to be someone they aren't. No insecurity. They were orbiting around each other, seeing each other as gifts from God (2:23-25).

God-centered community brings life.

But when sin enters the picture in Genesis 3, their harmony is broken because their focus is sucked inward like a vacuum. Instead of being **God-centered** and **others-centered**, they became **self-centered**. As a result of Satan's deceit and planting the thought in their minds that God was holding out on them, and that they could be their own god, suddenly obeying God wasn't worth it because God was a not a means to their end anymore. Why should Cain care about Abel? He's not his brother's keeper. Cain is about Cain. Cain was mad Abel looked better than him. And let's face it, we're all like this. So much of our anger is just us not getting our own way.

As sinners, we need to understand there is God and we're not Him and it's ultimately not about us but about Him. Everything is to the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; Rom. 11:36). But that's why God came into this world. Jesus came to restore that self-centered brokenness and create a **new humanity** and **new community** that is **God-centered** and as a result of the Spirit impressing His self-sacrificial love on the cross, would bring **healing and life** to relationships.

II. AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY RESTORED BY THE SPIRIT. (Acts 2:42-47;4:32-37)

If you remember from a couple of weeks ago in Acts 2:42-47, Luke gave a glimpse of this **ideal, Spirit-filled community**. We called it *A Strange Community* because it was other-worldly – even heavenly. They had **koinonia fellowship – all things in common**. A common faith. A common mission. They were a family taking care of each other. Remember? They weren't a bag of marbles; they were a bag of grapes. It's a community even the introvert wouldn't mind being a part of! The first part of today's text mirrors that idealism... for a while.

“And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each to the extent that any had need.

Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), owned a tract of land. So he sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.”

So again, this is another beautiful example of genuine Christian fellowship. Their one-anothering was incredible! A true oneness of heart and soul is brought about by their common faith in Christ.ⁱⁱ And we can tell their prayer from last week has been answered as they continue to boldly teach in Jesus' name even though it's against the law. But the emphasis is on their koinonia **generosity**.

Remember there were people in Jerusalem where they are from all over the world for Pentecost. People had only packed enough provisions probably for a few weeks, but then the Spirit came, the Church began, and God was doing amazing things! No one wanted to go back home to Italy or Cyprus or Persia – wherever they came from. And people had run out of provisions they'd brought on their journey. On top of that, there was many genuinely poor people. There was no social programs and Jesus attracted the poor and needy. So various people like **Barnabas** were stepping up to meet their needs, pooling their resources, opening and sharing their homes.

This is a life-giving community that meets real needs. Some people today read this and their mind drifts to socialism or communism without really thinking about what it really says. Socialism and communism says what's yours is mine, and forcibly takes it. This is more like common-ism or volunteerism, which says what mine is yours, and freely gives from the heart with love. It's not

forced. And that's what's God is looking for in us: **genuine, Spirit-led giving**. Not obligation or compulsion or resentment, but God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7).

Authentic community requires Spirit-led giving and sharing.

The author, **Luke**, highlights for us one man who becomes known as **Barnabas**. Barnabas means **Son of Encouragement**. The apostles called him this because this is what he was – encouraging! It was Howard Hendricks who said **we all need a Barnabas in our lives**. I'll add to that: **We all need to be a Barnabas to others!** Communities are built on the example of leading individuals like Barnabas.ⁱⁱⁱ A guy people can look up to and someone a disciple can follow. This is not the last time we run into Him either. His name will come up 23 times in Acts and we'll understand his name more all the time. He gives up everything to follow Jesus.

In a self-centered world where people live for their own glory and their own kingdom, where we have mottos like, "*The one who dies with the most toys, wins*", Barnabas is an encouragement. If we're going to make that switch from self-absorbed hoarders to being joyful, open-handed givers, we've got to understand **all that we have belongs to God** (we're just stewards of it) and **it's really about Him** and His gospel. We've also got to understand that so much of the reason why we're miserable and frustrated is because when we only live for ourselves, we're always at war with others. They're trying to get us to orbit them and we're trying to get them to orbit us. It doesn't work. When we're not God-centered, we're self-centered; and life is not a dance, it's a battle.

In a divided, self-absorbed world, a group of people with a single mission and vision and that is sharing each other's burdens stand, out in the world. The gospel is backed up by the way we live in an attractive community. Getting ready for the new members class, I was digging through the annals of **our church history**. Did you know this church started with a small group of believers who just wanted to study the Bible and pray together? They were meeting in various homes and in the Chadron City Hall and 2 people in the group gave money to buy the two lots that our church sits on. They were sensitive as to how God wanted them to give in His mission.

Question: *Are we sensitive to how God wants us to give? I'm a fan of routine giving but it's easy to say I've given my regular amount and now I'm done. But is there something or someone the Lord wants me to give towards that I'm missing because I'm just not looking or praying? When's the last time you took stock of things you have and thought about how someone else could use it?*

But that brings up another interesting point: how do we know each other's needs if we aren't getting together and spending time together. . . But if we don't, how will we know?

Authentic community requires some spending time together.

It's really easy to come and corporately worship God and listen to a sermon but never truly get connected to each other, to never experience body-life. Getting to know one another keeps us authentic and accountable. We're less tempted to put on a mask on Sunday morning and pretend

everything's okay. Many young people have given up on the church because the church isn't a community where people really belong to each other. We put walls around our weakness and smiles hide our pain (Stained Glass Masquerade by Casting Crowns). We're all ministers and the body is an organism that ministers to itself.

Church Challenge: *Ask someone in our church you don't know very well to get together this week. Go on a walk around town, exercise together. Get a cup of coffee or a meal. Learn each other's testimony. Be prayer partners who pray for each other. Accountability partners.*

So far, Luke has focused on the positives, but the idealism soon turns to realism. **Barnabas is contrasted with the episode of Ananias and Sapphira.**

III. THE THREAT TO AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY. (Acts 5:1-11)

“But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him [Jews buried the same day].

Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.”

Alright, so the Church isn't perfect after all! If you've read any of the NT letters, you know that. They're full of correction! Part of the reason is because every time God does something great, there is an enemy who wants to discredit it, and the enemy can be the enemy within us, in our own sin nature that Satan wants to take advantage of. Satan lurks in God's Church and seeks to undermine everything His new community represents. For their premeditated sin, God strikes them down personally on the spot. Peter didn't do it. He didn't call on God to do it. The Spirit just revealed it to Him because **the Spirit knows everything.**

Where did they go wrong though? Was it keeping some of the proceeds? Was it the amount? Was there giving regulations that required people to tithe a certain percentage? No. They were not under any obligation to sell it. After they sold it, they were under no obligation to give from it. The

problem was that they deceitfully lied about it out of a desire for self-glorification. They imitated Satan, the father of lies and pride. I think Ananias and Sapphira saw how esteemed Barnabas was for his gift and desired similar recognition for themselves. They didn't really have a heart that genuinely cared about the needy. Just like Judas (John 12:6) influenced by Satan. Notice the contrast between being filled with the Spirit or filled by Satanic motives.

It's amazing how deceitful the human heart can be? To do a good deed or serve the Lord only to make ourselves look good? When we go to give or serve the Lord in any way, a good question to ask is, ***"What's your motive?"***^v *Is it about you or God? Are you using God for you? Are you using others?* God would rather have us give 2 pennies with a right heart than 2 million with insidious, self-serving ulterior motives.

I don't know if there's a more revulsive sin than this and yet our day and age is filled with it. It's a sin of the spirit and one that James 3:13-16 calls demonic. It's the insidious spirit of pride, greed, power, and self-exaltation. Reminds me of a man named Diotrephes, from 3 John 1:9 who loved to be first and wouldn't welcome visiting Christians. Diotrephes caused community to disintegrate at that local church John wrote too. He needed meekness and humility (1 Peter 5:5-7).

Self-centeredness in community brings disintegration

Thankfully God doesn't judge instantaneously like this much. If He did, there wouldn't be enough undertakers. But this is something you've noticed if you've studied the Bible: whenever there is a new time period (dispensation) like this, with the beginning of the Church, God affirms He is with it by miraculous signs – *positive and negative*. People get the point and then the miracles typically subside or reduce in number. At Israel's beginning, Nadab and Abihu were instantaneously consumed for offering strange incense on God's altar and people learned to take God seriously. In Acts, God is making a point early on in the Church that He is serious about the purity of the Church because He is seeking restoration – a new people who does things differently.

God's authentic community and mission requires righteousness.

If the Spirit is going to keep moving and working in the Church, the Church has to stay humble and pure. Koinonia fellowship between God and man and man and man is broken by sin. Sin must be dealt with or it destroys them and those around it. How many marriages, families, workplaces, churches, and nations are divided and broken because of our self-seeking sinful ways?

If God's judgment here surprises us, it's probably because our view of sin and God's holiness is too small. And it tells us we don't understand the importance of the Church and what it is called to be in the world. We all struggle and fail at times in this war with sin. But it's not okay to willfully live in sin. Jesus redeemed us to free us from sin and to be a light in the world, but if we're just like it, what difference will it make? When we go out into the world, we don't just represent ourselves, we represent Jesus and His newly restored humanity.

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- ⁱ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in An Age of Skepticism* (NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 222-236.
- ⁱⁱ Homer Kent, *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1972), 50.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Darrell Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: BMH Books, 2007), 218.
- ^{iv} Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights, New Testament Commentary Volume 5* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale).